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ABSTRACT

Teacher study groups (TSGs) contribute to professional development when participants explore, articulate, and extend their personal professional knowledge in a supportive setting. In this study of cultural variables in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom, tensions among aspects of professional accountability and responsibility surfaced repeatedly, reflecting varying degrees of satisfaction in participants' views of their success as teachers. It was thus possible to propose a theoretical model of personal practical knowledge indicating these tensions and the resulting zones of relative comfort and discomfort with respect to accountability and responsibility. This theoretical model has important implications for the content and ethos of language teacher education programs, particularly regarding the need for preparation in areas beyond the necessary foundation in linguistic and pedagogical theory. (Author/SM)

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Novice Teachers Navigating the Socio-Cultural Terrain of the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT: Teacher study groups (TSGs) contribute to professional development when participants explore, articulate and extend their Personal Professional Knowledge in a supportive setting. In this study of cultural variables in the ESL classroom, tensions among aspects of professional accountability and responsibility surfaced repeatedly, reflecting varying degrees of satisfaction in participants' views of their success as teachers. It was thus possible to propose a theoretical model of Personal Practical Knowledge indicating these tensions and the resulting zones of relative comfort and discomfort with respect to accountability and responsibility. This theoretical model has important implications for the content and ethos of language-teacher education programs, particularly regarding the need for preparation in areas beyond the necessary foundation in linguistic and pedagogical theory.

Background

As Clair (1998) observes, teacher study groups (TSGs) have shown excellent potential to facilitate teachers' articulation in their own terms of professional challenges, opportunities and strategies; the opportunity for sharing and collaboration makes TSGs an appropriate setting for the encouragement and expression of that part of professional growth which has come to be known as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). And in fact TSGs have proven very effective in the specific context of ESL (Golombek, 1998). In particular, the supportive environment provided by the TSG format may be expected to promote clear-sighted and confident discussion of unexpected or even shocking experiences that can make extremely trying demands on teachers' sense of identity and purpose. Idealistic but relatively inexperienced newcomers to the profession not infrequently meet with unanticipated circumstances liable to bring special poignancy to their need, as identified by Freeman and Johnson (1998: 409), to understand how "schools and classrooms function as frameworks of value and interpretation in which [they] must learn to work effectively."

The Shock of Entry into the Profession

Although teacher education programs devote considerable time to understanding and meeting their students' needs, so as to make the transition to professional life as smooth and successful as possible, there is abundant anecdotal evidence that, after a few months or years of teaching, many graduates still feel that they face a dauntingly steep learning curve as new professionals. Indeed, they may perceive that some of their most demanding challenges – as they now recognize them – were actually addressed very little or not at all during their training. In this respect, we suggest that novice teachers' initial experience of excitement and idealism, typically followed by a plunge into self-questioning and discouragement through which they must work their way towards ever-growing professionalism, can in certain respects be usefully compared with the

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well-known phenomenon of culture shock, in which individuals entering a new national and/or linguistic environment often move through a honeymoon period of extreme elation at the outset, only to find this euphoria replaced by the stressful phase of unexpected doubts and resentment typically associated with culture shock itself (Hall, 1959: 156).

The comparison with culture shock draws attention to the frequent disjunction between, on the one hand, novice teachers' perception of the professional challenges they actually face and, on the other hand, the content of the teacher education courses that prepared them. Certainly, in the study that we report, there was a clear implication that, while on the whole very useful as far as it went, that preparation had a number of significant gaps. Overall, it appears that – rather as in the classic process of culture shock – novice ESL teachers may experience a new professional environment exhibiting not only a variety of technical or objective dimensions for which they feel excellently and confidently prepared, but also certain interpersonal or subjective dimensions that make unanticipated and very troubling demands on them.

Description of the Study

The study was carried out over the period of February to April, 2001. There were two data-collection procedures. First, there were five audio-taped Teacher Study Group (TSG) discussions, each about one hour in length and scheduled at two-week intervals, focussing on cultural variables in ESL teaching and learning: a total of 5 hours over the winter academic term. Both researchers were present at each TSG session, which looked at the following themes: (1) Types of Interaction, and Micro-Community Structures and Roles; (2) Work and Play, and Space and Time; (3) Gender Roles; (4) Solidarity and Caring, and Instrumentality; (5) a review of previous sessions, debriefing, and closure.

Second, each participant wrote one written critical incident report, between 3 to 4 pages in length, on a single telling event where cultural variables had been salient and significant (about 1 to 2 hours preparation time). This paper will focus particularly on the TSG sessions.

There were five participants – one male and five female – all teaching at the time in an Ontario university Intensive English Language Program; all were English native speakers, aged in their mid-twenties to late thirties. Four were in permanent relationships (two with non-Anglo spouses); one was single. All had at least a university Certificate in TESL (or an M.Ed. TESL in progress). All could count from three to seven years' teaching experience, including overseas experience for three individuals. Two had come to the profession several years after a first degree, with prior work experience outside TESL.

Emergent Themes: The Realities of Responsibility and Accountability

One enlightening way in which to visualize the challenges facing the novice teachers in our study is in terms of the sometimes mutually reinforcing but sometimes conflicting demands of accountability and responsibility. The struggle to reach a thorough reconciliation between those two crucial professional ideals characterized much of what these teachers had to say about their personal journeys; moreover, their difficulty in achieving that reconciliation was very evidently an emotional lightning-rod that attracted a good deal not only of their surprise and frustration, but also of their highly productive insights into how their teacher education had, to an extent, failed them.

Participants' comments reflected a view of their teaching experience structured around four zones of practice with varying degrees of professional comfort (Figure 1).

Ideal Professional Comfort Zone Teacher has a strong sense of both (a) what he/she is accountable for and (b) how to deliver it responsibly: i.e. Teacher confidently knows what is required, and has the skills and empowerment to do it.	***Responsibility Discomfort Zone*** Teacher has a strong sense of what he/she is accountable for, but a weaker sense of having the skill or empowerment to deliver it (ability to take responsibility).
Accountability Discomfort Zone Teacher feels uncertainty about what should be delivered (accountability), no matter how skilled or empowered he/she may otherwise feel (responsibility).	***Extreme Professional Discomfort Zone*** Teacher experiences doubts both about accountability and about responsibility issues.

Figure 1

From the tone of the discussions it was plain that based on their good academic training, on the reality that they had in fact been hired and rehired by the institution, and in some instances on their prior success in other settings, these participants had expected that much of their experience would fall into the Ideal Professional Comfort Zone and that little if any would fall into the Extreme Professional Discomfort Zone. However, although some elements of their experience did indeed fit into the Ideal Professional Comfort Zone, a good deal did not. And the reasons for that distribution were very interesting.

The picture was certainly not relentlessly bleak. For instance, participant Dagmar (all pseudonyms) spoke warmly about excellent moments "when we kind of pull together as a team in class... and we're single-minded on learning... and yet somehow it's made fun but we learn." And Bart, generalizing about his experience, commented optimistically that "in the ESL classroom the teachers do everything within their power to accommodate everybody, and ... very rarely does the teacher become an antagonist." Likewise, Stacey remarked of one group, "I think that they like to work with other cultures because then they know that they won't speak their own language... they're forced to speak English and I think they're monitoring themselves... that's one good class!" Even in circumstances where there was sometimes a struggle, as with encouraging students to take more responsibility for self-directed activities, Dana could observe,

> Well, I don't do it in order to be fun. With me, it's not for a game at all, it's purposefully for teaching them to be clearer when they're speaking and to be clearer about how they present it and to rely on each other... I honestly don't do it as a game, but with the level 5s it did turn into a game. It was something they liked. With the level 3s, they didn't think it was fun but they got, they found it

was beneficial.

Such statements reflect both a confident sense of what is required (accountability) and a reasonably assured sense of being able to promote the desired educational goal (responsibility); and although relatively rare, remarks like these were definitely made on occasion by all participants except one (Michelle).

Still, participant comments also revealed a significant number of experiences which fell into zones of discomfort, including the worst-case Extreme Professional Discomfort Zone. In terms of accountability, participants often felt uncertain about what was actually expected of them. Above all, this seemed to stem from changes in program demographics that had not been recognized by program administrators, rather than from misunderstanding the more technical, linguistic demands on instructors. Comments expressed confusion about what participants' actual duties should be: for example, "You start to wonder if the program is really filling a need" (Michelle). Overall, participants clearly felt dismayed by working in a context where students "are a paying customer and they can do whatever they want" (Stacey), concluding that "we need some mutual respect here" (Dagmar).

On the other hand, when inability to fulfill responsibilities was the issue, weak technical or pedagogical skills rather rarely surfaced as the cause. Participants did, in good faith, occasionally remark on a technical obligation with which they had difficulty, as seen in Michelle's comment that "I don't exactly know what to do about the environment in which these students find themselves." But vastly more often, the problem was a lack of empowerment: tests in a small room where "cheating happened because of the proximity of the students" (Bart), students who find "my writing textbook is still not in the store" (Stacey), "teachers' offices... all over the map" (Dagmar), or group discussions in an unsuitably furnished space that "absolutely cannot work" (Michelle).

And not infrequently these two difficulties overlapped, putting participants in the Extreme Professional Discomfort Zone. Consider this exchange between two participants regarding the shifting market niche and consequent academic and methodological demands of the program:

> Michelle: I'm finding it really difficult with that change... I'm not really sure if our, well actually, ah, that our requirements of them, our criteria, or our evaluation process isn't working in this changing social atmosphere...
>
> Dagmar: Yeah, I very much agree there. There are days when I feel like I'm fighting some unseen system and I'm beginning to feel like, I almost feel bad about keeping my standards.

In these circumstances, teachers appear desperately uncertain about what is wrong: the overall support and direction that should be guiding the program (accountability), or the practical skills that they themselves should be developing and bringing to bear (responsibility)? Neither seems reliable. In Dana's candid words, "We're just sort of stuck in the flux."

<u>The More Technical Aspects of Teacher Education</u>

It is not impossible to identify a very few negative comments regarding the utility of the more technical dimension of the participants' teacher preparation: for example, Bart's observation that, despite all the theories, the real effectiveness of methodological choices "totally depends on the student", or Dana's lament that, even after training in intercultural communication, "We're just

fumbling around, basically!" Still, there was definitely no general attack on the value of a good background in such areas as linguistics, educational psychology, curriculum design, testing and so on. Quite the contrary. Common access to useful concepts and terminology plainly bonded the participants into a cohesive group with an ability to understand, support and advise each other effectively. This shared technical background facilitated concise specification of various educational factors that group members wanted to examine: for instance, "I find that in writing..." (Dagmar),"You can't get rid of the social aspect of communication..." (Dana), "They focus on the target language..." (Stacey), "Creativity is a must in speaking" (Michelle), or "The computer is, is actually a tool... whereas the earphones... are just a channel" (Bart). The transcripts were peppered with such remarks; clearly, the participants could not have carried on these discussions without the basic technical expertise they exemplify.

However, these numerous technical references were almost always very brief. And the way in which this knowledge was used strongly suggested that its chief benefit was not that it contributed directly to solving many of the pressing problems raised by the participants – because those problems were in themselves rarely of such a formal nature – but rather that it permitted discussion to focus quickly on the most fundamental concern, which was far more personal and affective: professional growth as accountable and responsible members of an educational community.

Discussion

Especially if the results of this study are confirmed with additional participants in other settings, there is an implication that educational programs for trainee ESL teachers would do well to increase their preparation of candidates for the shock of moving from a training to a professional environment. Increased awareness of the tensions associated with that adjustment might also translate into more effective management and mentoring strategies among current teachers and administrators where novice instructors are being introduced. A balance of these two adjustments could be expected to increase the comfort and success of new teachers. Nonetheless, this heightened sensitivity to issues around individual growth as responsible and accountable professionals cannot be achieved at the expense of the more traditional focus on technical skills and knowledge. Ways must be found to make the change an additive process; there was clear evidence throughout the study that the participants relied very much on the more technical parts of their educational background and would have been ill-served by any reduction in that area. Moreover, they made very few negative comments about that aspect of their preparation. What they clearly wanted was all of that technical material plus more in the area of empowerment for individual professional growth. That is a pretty tall order but, working together, a combination of pre-service teacher education programs, in-service professional development opportunities, wise administrators and effective colleague-mentors can surely address this need.

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